



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While Early Reform Efforts Tackle Critical Management Issues, a District-Wide Strategic Education Plan Would Help Guide Long- Term Efforts

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Highlights of [GAO-08-549T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to long-standing problems with student academic performance, the condition of school facilities, and the overall management of the D.C. public school system, the D.C. Council approved the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (Reform Act). The Reform Act made major changes to the operations and governance of the D.C. public school system, giving the Mayor authority over public schools, including curricula, personnel, and school facilities. While other large urban districts have transferred governance of schools to their mayors, D.C. is unique because it functions as both local and state offices for many education responsibilities.

GAO's testimony focuses on (1) the status of the District's efforts to reform its public school system, and (2) what the District has done to establish accountability for these efforts. To address these issues GAO reviewed documents, interviewed District education officials and interviewed principals from nine D.C. public schools.

What GAO Recommends

To sustain D.C.'s efforts to transform its public school system, GAO recommends that the D.C. Department of Education develop a long-term districtwide education strategic plan. In response, the District supported the need for a strategy, but preferred a formal process rather than a written document to coordinate and sustain its efforts.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-549T](#). For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While Early Reform Efforts Tackle Critical Management Issues, a District-Wide Strategic Education Plan Would Help Guide Long-Term Efforts

What GAO Found

The early efforts to improve D.C. public schools have focused largely on broad management reforms and other activities that lay the foundation for long-term improvements to the D.C. public school system. The broad management reforms included the transfer of many functions from D.C. public schools (DCPS) into the new office of the state superintendent, which could allow for more effective oversight of the District's education programs. Prior to the Reform Act, there was no clear separation of funding, reporting, and staffing between local and state functions. A new facilities office was also created to improve the conditions of DCPS school facilities. Moving state-level education and facilities functions out of DCPS is intended to give the head of DCPS, called the Chancellor, more time to focus on issues that directly affect student achievement. The management reforms also included specific human capital initiatives such as new DCPS central office personnel rules and new systems for evaluating central office and state-level employee performance. In addition, both the State Superintendent and the Chancellor are working to improve their data systems to better track and monitor the performance of students, teachers, and schools. DCPS also completed its school consolidation plan that identified over 20 schools for closure over the next several years. In addition, the school facilities office is working to address the backlog of repairs. The director of the facilities office told us that he found that school heating and plumbing systems were inoperable, roofs leaked, and floors needed replacing. In addition, he said many schools were in violation of District fire codes. To address the backlog and ongoing facilities needs, the new office undertook several repair programs this summer and early fall.

The D.C. Mayor and education officials have introduced a performance-based process designed to establish accountability for their school reform efforts. This process includes weekly meetings to track progress and accomplishments across education offices. In addition, the Mayor's office required agencies to develop annual performance plans. D.C. Department of Education officials told us they review the individual performance plans of District education offices, such as DCPS and the state superintendent's office, to ensure they are aligned. Officials told us they have not yet developed a documented districtwide education strategic plan. According to department officials, they do not intend to develop a written plan at this time, in part, because they are addressing immediate issues. They questioned the need for a written document as opposed to a formalized process that would help ensure that individual plans are coordinated. While developing a strategic plan takes time, it is useful for entities undergoing a major transformation, such as the D.C. public school system. A strategic plan helps organizations look across the goals of multiple offices and identify if they are aligned or working at cross-purposes. Without a plan that sets priorities, implementation goals, and timelines, it may be difficult to measure progress over time and determine if the District is truly achieving success. In addition, given that leadership changes, a strategic plan would provide a road map for future District leaders by explaining the steps taken, or not taken, and why.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to present information on the District of Columbia's (D.C. or District) progress in reforming its public school system. The system serves about 50,000 students and operates 144 schools.¹ In fiscal year 2007, its operating budget exceeded \$1 billion and the federal government provided funds for about 13 percent of that amount. Long-standing problems with student academic performance, the condition of school facilities, and the overall management of the D.C. school system have been well documented over the last several decades. In particular, the academic challenges facing the District are enormous. In 2007, D.C. public schools ranked last in math scores and second-to-last in reading scores for all tested urban public school systems on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Also called "The Nation's Report Card," the NAEP has been conducted regularly since 1969 and tracks student achievement throughout the United States over time.

In response to these critical problems, the Council of the District of Columbia (D.C. Council) approved the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007² (Reform Act), which made major changes to the operations and governance of the D.C. school system. The act gave the Mayor authority over public schools, including curricula, operations, budget, personnel, and school facilities. While other large urban school districts have transferred governance of their troubled public schools to their mayors, D.C. is unique because it functions as both a local and state agency for many education responsibilities.

In addition to granting the Mayor authority over the schools, the Reform Act also made the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) a cabinet-level agency under the Mayor's office and moved functions from building repairs to administration of federal education programs out of DCPS and into two separate, new offices. (In this statement, we frequently refer to DCPS and these two new offices as education offices.) Given the magnitude of the

¹This number does not include about 81 charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that are exempt from certain regulations in exchange for increased accountability for improving student achievement. This testimony statement does not include a discussion of charter schools.

²The Council of the District of Columbia approved the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 on April 19. District of Columbia Laws, Act 17-38 (2007). The bill was then passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush on June 1. Pub. L. No. 110-33.

school system's challenges and the changes made by the Reform Act, you asked us to assess the progress to date of the reform efforts. My testimony today will focus on (1) the status of the District's efforts to reform its public school system and (2) what the District has done to establish accountability for these efforts.

In summary, the early initiatives to improve the D.C. public school system have focused largely on broad management reforms and other activities that lay the foundation for long-term improvements. The broad management reforms included the transfer of many functions from DCPS to the new offices of the state superintendent and facilities. One purpose of the transfer was to give the head of DCPS, called the Chancellor, more time to focus on issues that directly affect student achievement. The management reforms also included specific human capital initiatives such as new DCPS central office personnel rules and new systems for evaluating central office employee performance to establish more efficient, functional offices. District education offices have also begun to lay a foundation for long-term improvements to schools by enhancing student and personnel data systems, developing a plan for school consolidation, setting academic priorities, and improving management of school facilities. The Mayor and education officials have also introduced a performance-based process designed to establish accountability for their school reform efforts. This process includes holding weekly meetings to track progress and accomplishments across education offices and requiring these offices to develop and follow annual performance plans. However, the Mayor's team has not yet developed a districtwide strategic education plan. Without such a plan, it may be difficult to coordinate the work of multiple offices and evaluate short-term and long-term progress. In order to assess the District's progress in improving its public school system and provide a road map for future District leadership and concerned community groups, we recommend the development of a districtwide education strategic plan.

To assess the progress of the Mayor's reform efforts and actions taken to establish accountability for these efforts, we interviewed the Deputy Mayor for Education, who heads the D.C. Department of Education, the Chancellor of DCPS, the State Superintendent of Education, and the Director of the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (the facilities office). We also interviewed key staff in these offices. We analyzed planning documents that established the goals, time frames, and performance measures for individual offices, and relevant laws related to D.C. reform efforts. We interviewed officials with the D.C. Office of the Inspector General and officials at the U.S. Department of Education who

monitor how the District administers its federal education grants. We also interviewed principals from nine D.C. public schools to discuss matters such as the status of repairs to their buildings.³ We analyzed recent evaluations of DCPS and interviewed staff who conducted these evaluations.⁴ We conducted our work from September 2007 to March 2008 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Background

The problems in the D.C. public school system have persisted for years despite numerous efforts at reform. In 1989, a report by the D.C. Committee on Public Education noted declining achievement levels as students move through grades, the poor condition of the school system's physical facilities, and the lack of accountability among D.C. agencies for the schools.⁵ Recent reports have continued to cite these problems. In 2004, the Council of the Great City Schools reviewed the D.C. school system and cited the continued failure to improve students' academic performance.⁶ In 2006, an analysis of DCPS reform efforts by a consulting firm found no progress and recommended a change in governance to improve student achievement and systemwide accountability.⁷

In response to these problems, the D.C. Council (the legislative branch of the D.C. government) approved the 2007 Reform Act, which significantly altered the governance of the D.C. public schools.⁸ The Reform Act transferred the day-to-day management of the public schools from the

³We chose these schools to obtain variation in the type of school (elementary, middle, or high school); location (ward); whether repair work had been during the summer of 2007; and whether there was an interim principal.

⁴These evaluations included several studies by the Council of the Great City Schools, a national organization representing the needs of urban public schools, and D.C. Voice, a citywide community organization that reports on conditions in the D.C. public schools.

⁵*Our Children, Our Future: Revitalizing The District of Columbia Public Schools*, The D.C. Committee on Public Education, Washington, D.C. (June 1989).

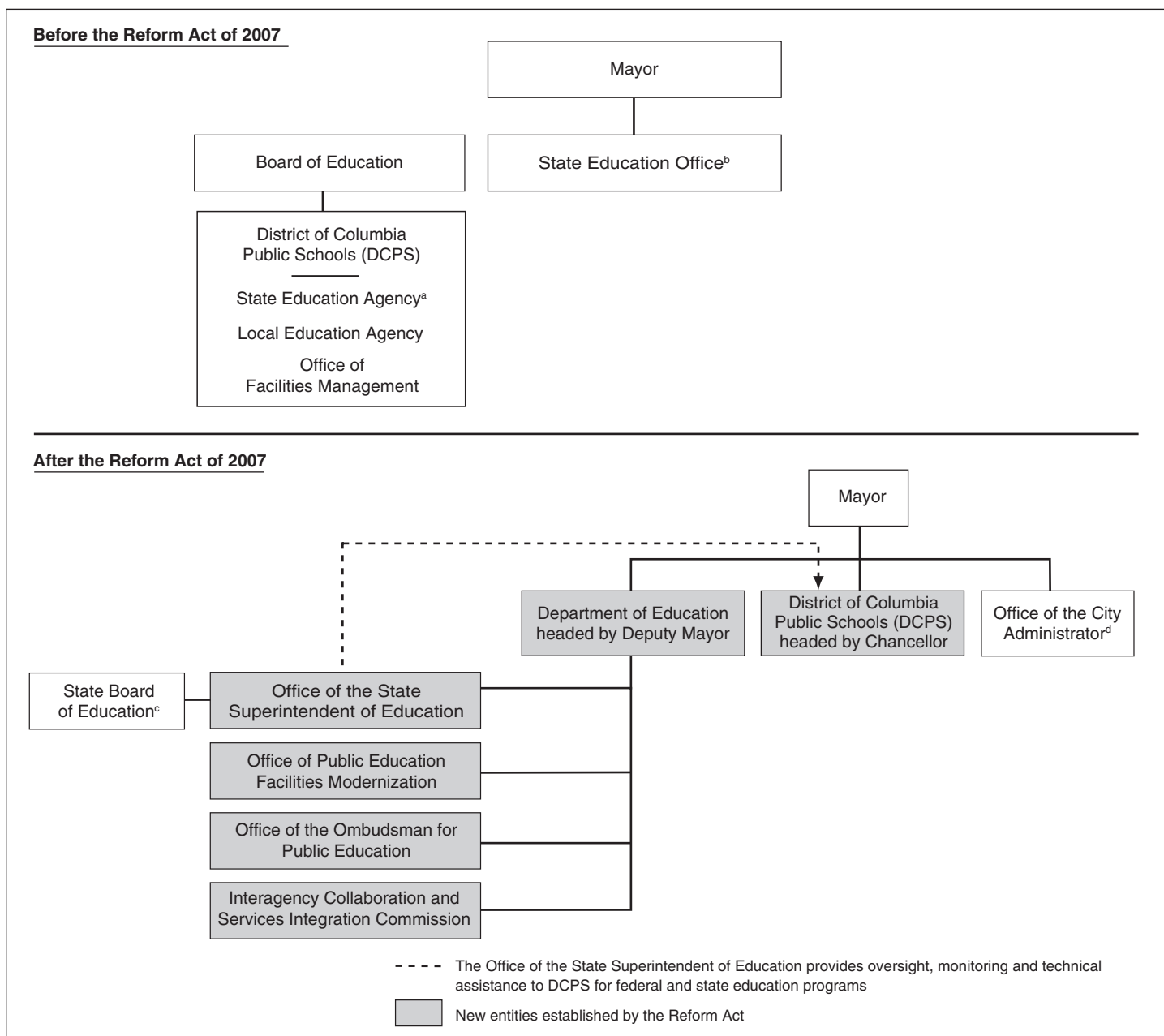
⁶*Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*, Council of the Great City Schools, Washington, D.C. (January 2004).

⁷*Fact-Base for DCPS Reform*, The Parthenon Group, Boston, London, San Francisco (December 2006).

⁸Subsequent to the Council's approval, Congress passed the Reform Act. The District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act, also known as the Home Rule Act, generally provides a framework and processes for Congress to enact, amend, or repeal any act with respect to the District of Columbia.

Board of Education to the Mayor and placed DCPS under the Mayor's office as a cabinet-level agency. Prior to the Reform Act, the head of DCPS reported to the Board of Education. The Reform Act also moved the state functions into a new state superintendent's office, moved the facilities office out of DCPS, and created a D.C. Department of Education headed by the Deputy Mayor for Education. (See fig. 1.)

Figure 1: D.C. Public Schools Governance Structure, prior to the 2007 Reform Act and after the Reform Act



Source: GAO analysis based on The Parthenon Group, December 2006 and D.C. government documents.

^aThe State Education Agency had responsibility for administering federal grant money, and setting state academic standards, achievement goals, and graduation requirements. The Local Education Agency, typically referred to as the school district, had responsibility for the management and operations of D.C. public schools.

^bThe State Education Office administered food nutrition programs and state scholarship grants.

^cThe State Board of Education was the Board of Education prior to the Reform Act.

^dThe Office of the City Administrator prepares the District's annual operating budget and provides direction to all District agencies, including DCPS. Prior to the Reform Act, the City Administrator did not have this role because the Mayor did not have direct oversight of DCPS.

DCPS: DCPS functions as a traditional local educational agency, or school district. The head of DCPS, the Chancellor, is appointed by the Mayor, confirmed by the D.C. Council, and serves at the Mayor's discretion. The Chancellor sets the academic priorities and the curriculum for public schools, and works with schools in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA).⁹ School districts have the primary responsibility for ensuring that underperforming schools receive technical assistance, as required by NCLBA.

Department of Education: The new D.C. Department of Education is headed by the Deputy Major for Education and oversees the state superintendent's office, facilities office, and the ombudsman's office.¹⁰ The department is responsible for planning, coordinating, and supervising all public education and education-related activities that are under the purview of these three offices. It also acts as chief advisor to the Mayor for broad, high-level education strategies that involve more than one District education office and has responsibility for bringing together key players to determine who should take the lead on specific initiatives. In addition, the Deputy Mayor coordinates the work, direction, and agenda of the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission (Interagency Commission), which serves as a high-level policy making body that coordinates meetings with directors from children and youth-serving agencies. According to the Deputy Mayor, the purpose of the Interagency Commission is to build consensus and set priorities for how to best address the needs of District children and youth.

⁹Under NCLBA, states are required to establish performance goals and hold schools that receive federal funds under Title I of the act accountable for student performance by determining whether or not they have made adequate yearly progress. Schools that have not made adequate yearly progress for 2 or more consecutive years are identified as in need of improvement and must implement certain activities meant to improve student academic achievement.

¹⁰The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is tasked with providing outreach to residents, including parents, and encouraging communication between residents and the Mayor. In short, it serves as a vehicle for citizens to communicate their complaints and concerns regarding public education and for providing responses to these concerns in a timely fashion.

Office of the State Superintendent of Education: The state superintendent's office is responsible for functions traditionally handled by a state educational agency. It develops academic standards, helps develop teacher licensing requirements, and administers funds for federal and District education programs. The State Superintendent is also responsible for developing comprehensive assessments, or tests, and ensuring that DCPS meets federal requirements for elementary and secondary education under NCLBA.¹¹ The office also oversees, among other functions, those related to early childhood education programs and adult education and literacy.

State Board of Education: While the Board of Education—renamed the State Board of Education—no longer has responsibility for day-to-day operations of the public schools, it is responsible for approving the District's academic standards, high-school graduation requirements, and other educational standards. It is required to advise the State Superintendent on policies related to the governing of vocational and charter schools and proposed education regulations. Five of the nine State Board of Education members are elected and four are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the D.C. Council.

Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (facilities office): The Reform Act not only moved the facilities office out of DCPS but gave the new office independent procurement and personnel authority. These functions were formerly performed by separate divisions within DCPS not directly accountable to or managed by the DCPS facilities office. The new facilities office is responsible for modernization and maintenance of D.C. public schools.¹² DCPS retains oversight of the janitorial services of individual schools.

¹¹The state also plays a role in providing technical assistance to schools in improvement and overseeing the improvement activities of districts. State educational agencies are responsible for making several forms of technical assistance available to schools in improvement and overseeing the improvement activities of districts. For more information on the role of state educational agencies under NCLBA, see *No Child Left Behind Act: Education Should Clarify Guidance and Address Potential Compliance Issues for Schools in Corrective Action and Restructuring Status*, [GAO-07-1035](#). (Washington, D.C.: September 2007)

¹²The School Modernization Use of Funds Requirements Emergency Amendment Act of 2007 gave the facilities office the authority to conduct maintenance activities at D.C. schools. District of Columbia Laws, Act 17-216 (2007).

The Reform Act also gave the D.C. Council an expanded role in overseeing some aspects of D.C. public school management. For example, the Mayor is required to submit proposed DCPS rules and regulations to the Council for review. In addition, the Council has gained new powers over the DCPS budget. The Mayor submits the budget for Council review and the Council may modify the funding allocated to individual schools. Previously, the Council only had authority to approve or disapprove the budget.

Early Initiatives Are Focused on Broad Management Reforms and Establishing a Foundation for Long-Term Improvements

The early efforts to improve D.C. public schools have focused largely on broad management reforms and other activities that lay the foundation for long-term improvements, such as developing new data systems, a school consolidation plan, academic priorities, and improving school facilities. Management reforms included the transfer of many functions from DCPS to the new offices of state superintendent and facilities. According to District officials, moving state-level education and facility functions out of DCPS should give the Chancellor more time to focus on issues that directly affect student achievement. Furthermore, moving state functions out of DCPS is intended to allow more effective oversight of the District's education programs. The management reforms also included specific human capital initiatives, such as new central office personnel rules and new systems for evaluating central office and state employee performance that are designed to improve office efficiency. District education offices also have begun to lay a foundation for long-term improvements to student and personnel data systems and management of building maintenance.

Broad Management Reforms Include Office Restructuring and Human Capital Initiatives

As required by the Reform Act, state-level education functions previously performed by DCPS were transferred to the new office of the state superintendent.¹³ This office developed a transition plan, as required by the Reform Act, which detailed the transfer of authority and restructuring of key staff functions and budgets. On October 1, 2007, over 100 staff, functions, and associated funds were transferred to the office of the state superintendent. Staff who spent at least half their time working on state-level functions, such as administering funds for federal and state education programs, became employees of the state superintendent's office. The Reform Act moved state functions out of DCPS, in large part, to

¹³The Reform Act consolidated state-level education functions that were previously performed by DCPS and the State Education Agency, and several other offices into one office, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

provide for independent oversight. Prior to the Reform Act, there was no clear separation of funding, reporting, and staffing between local and state functions within DCPS. For example, staff who monitored federal grant programs reported to the same person as staff who implemented those programs. As a result of the Reform Act, staff who perform state-related functions, such as monitoring federal programs, report to the State Superintendent whereas staff who implement the programs report to the DCPS Chancellor.

The transition plan also laid out immediate and long-term priorities, such as federal grants management reform and improved teacher quality. To improve federal grants management, the State Superintendent has established priorities and begun to address long-term deficiencies identified by the U.S. Department of Education (Education) related to federal program administration, including compliance with NCLBA.¹⁴ Specifically, the State Superintendent has established a direct line of accountability by having the director of federal grants report directly to her and serve on her leadership team. In addition, to meet NCLBA requirements, the State Superintendent is in the process of establishing a statewide system of support that will provide technical assistance to underperforming schools. The State Superintendent has stated that establishing this process is challenging, given that 75 percent of D. C. schools have been identified as needing improvement under NCLBA. The district also ranks as one of the lowest school districts for having qualified teachers, with only 55 percent of core classes taught by teachers that meet NCLBA requirements for highly qualified.¹⁵ The transition plan identified teacher quality as a priority area, but does not outline measurable goals for increasing the number of highly qualified teachers. According to the State Superintendent, the office has started to develop a strategic plan that will provide more specifics on its goals and objectives. Specifically, this plan would include measurable goals such as increasing the number of highly

¹⁴The U.S. Department of Education designated the District as a high-risk grantee in April 2006 because of its poor management of federal grants. If the District continues to be designated as a high-risk grantee, Education could respond by taking several actions, such as discontinuing one or more federal grants made to the District or having a third party take control over the administration of federal grants.

¹⁵NCLBA generally requires all teachers of core academic subjects, such as reading, math, and science, to have a bachelor's degree, state certification, and demonstrable subject matter competency for each core subject taught. According to an official at the state superintendent office, the District plans to revise its definition for highly qualified teachers to align with the NCLBA definition. Currently according to agency officials, the District's definition for is more stringent.

qualified teachers. According to the state superintendent's office, this strategic planning effort will be completed in mid-summer 2008. The state superintendent's office also plans to revise the District's "highly qualified teacher" definition under NCLBA and is also considering revisions to how the District certifies teachers to align to the revised definition.

The Reform Act also created a new facilities office to improve the conditions of DCPS school facilities. Unlike state-level functions, DCPS facilities staff and functions have not yet formally transferred to the new facilities office. Although the new office took over responsibility for modernization of school facilities (i.e., major renovations or new construction) and facility maintenance in the summer of 2007, functions and staff will not be formally transferred until the facility budget is "reprogrammed" and moved.¹⁶ In addition, the office will oversee general contractors who are hired for major construction projects such as the building of new schools. The director of the facilities office told us about 400 staff (building engineers, painters, and general maintenance workers) will transfer to his office.

The District's broad management reforms also included an emphasis on human capital initiatives, particularly efforts to hold employees accountable for their work. Both the State Superintendent and the DCPS Chancellor include new individual performance evaluations as part of their efforts to develop high-performing organizations. Previously, performance evaluations were not conducted for most DCPS staff, including those who moved to the state superintendent's office. DCPS officials told us that all staff had received performance evaluations as of January 2008. These evaluation forms were based on District government-wide competencies, such as maintaining and demonstrating high-quality and timely customer service and using resources effectively. DCPS officials told us that these evaluations do not yet link to their offices' performance goals because they had limited time to implement the new performance system. However, they stated that they plan to develop the linkages over the next year. Officials at the state superintendent's office told us that performance measurement plans have been developed for all staff and performance evaluations based on those plans will begin in late March 2008. The State

¹⁶In the summer of 2007, the Director of the new facilities office and the DCPS Chancellor signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that allowed the director to manage all construction projects for D.C. school facilities. Modernization funds will be moved to the new office when the budget reprogramming occurs. The D.C. Council must approve the reprogramming.

Superintendent has required each staff member to develop an individual plan that includes specific goals that are linked to the office's overall goals as outlined in the office performance plan.

The facilities office intends to create and sustain a culture of high performance and accountability by implementing a performance management system that will hold employees accountable for their work and establish a performance feedback process that ensures "a dialogue between supervisors, managers, and employees throughout the year."¹⁷ Linking individual performance evaluations to organizational goals is an important step in building a high-performing organization. As we noted in a previous report, organizations use their performance management systems to support their strategic goals by helping individuals see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.¹⁸

Other human capital initiatives included the Chancellor's effort to improve the capacity of the central office by terminating central office employees who were assessed as not meeting expectations on their performance evaluations and replacing them with staff who have the requisite skills. Specifically, the Chancellor told us she needs staff who are capable of providing critical central office services, so that, for example, teachers are paid and textbooks delivered on time. Several principals we spoke with told us that school staff have spent considerable time on repeatedly calling the central office for support or supplies, time that could otherwise be spent on instruction. In January 2008, the D.C. Council passed the Public Education Personnel Reform Amendment Act of 2008,¹⁹ submitted by the Chancellor and the Mayor, which gave the Mayor greater authority to terminate certain staff within DCPS' central office, including non-union staff and staff hired after 1980.²⁰ According to the Chancellor, this

¹⁷See *Transition Plan: Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization* (Washington D.C. Dec. 3, 2007).

¹⁸GAO *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*, [GAO-03-488](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2003).

¹⁹District of Columbia Laws, Act 17-271 (2008).

²⁰Under prior law, employees may only be terminated for cause and have greater procedural protections when decisions to terminate are made. In the first year after enactment, the new law would authorize the termination of certain employees without notice or performance evaluations. Future terminations would require a 15-day separation notice and performance evaluations within 6 months of separation. The new personnel law also applies to certain staff within the state superintendent's office and facilities office.

legislation ultimately will allow her to begin building a workforce that has the qualifications needed for a high-functioning central office.²¹

Other Activities, Such as Developing New Data Systems, a School Consolidation Plan, and Academic Priorities, Have Begun to Lay the Foundation for Long-Term Improvements

Both the state superintendent's office and DCPS are working to improve their data systems to better track and monitor the performance of students, teachers, and schools. The superintendent's office is in the process of selecting a contractor to build a longitudinal database that will store current and historical data on students, teachers, and schools. Currently, there is no one system that tracks the movement of students among District schools. The new database is being designed to standardize how data are collected from DCPS and charter schools and to track student data, such as attendance and test scores across multiple years. According to the state superintendent's office, this database will help stakeholders identify which schools and teachers are improving student achievement and determine what instructional approaches work best for which types of students. Education awarded the state superintendent's office a 3-year grant totaling nearly \$6 million to help fund this effort. The database is expected to be fully operational by 2012.

DCPS is also focused on improving the quality of student data, some of which will be inputted into the state longitudinal database. Currently, DCPS student data are not consistently reported throughout the numerous data systems. In addition, the multiple systems often have contradictory information. For example, the Chancellor told us that one system showed there were 5,000 special education students in the District while another showed 10,000. To address these problems, DCPS told us that they are consolidating its data systems, eliminating duplicate information, and verifying data accuracy. DCPS officials told us they expect the new student data management system to be operational by February 2009.

In addition to student data systems, DCPS has also taken steps to change and improve its personnel data systems by moving from a paper-based to an electronic system. DCPS scanned millions of personnel files into an electronic data system. According to agency officials, this was necessary because the files that existed were in unorganized stacks in office closets and not securely maintained. DCPS officials told us that they had scanned nearly 5 million documents. The scanning revealed missing personnel records for some staff members and, in other cases, job descriptions that

²¹On March 7, 2008, 98 staff members in the DCPS central office were terminated pursuant to the authority granted by the new law.

did not match the jobs staff were actually performing. In addition, the D.C. Office of the Inspector General is currently conducting an audit of the DCPS payroll system, to be released in the summer of 2008, to verify that every individual who receives a paycheck from DCPS is currently employed with the school system.

In February 2008, DCPS completed its preliminary school consolidation (closing) plan that identified over 20 schools for closure over the next several years in an effort to provide more resources to the remaining schools. Plans to consolidate D.C. public schools have been underway in recent years and Congress has raised concerns about the inefficiency of maintaining millions of square feet of underutilized or unused space in DCPS facilities. (DCPS is currently operating at approximately 330 square feet per student, while the national average is 150 square feet.) According to DCPS officials, the cost of administration, staff, and facilities in underutilized schools diverts resources from academic programs for all students. However, it is unclear how much long-term savings, if any, will result from these closings. DCPS officials told us that they are currently working with the facilities office and the District Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) to develop long-term cost estimates. In addition, some parents, community groups, and the D.C. Council disagreed with the process the Chancellor and Mayor used to develop the plan. The D.C. Council expressed concern that the Mayor and Chancellor did not present the proposal to the Council before it was made public,²² and some community members met to express their opposition to the closings. The Chancellor provided a detailed report of the criteria²³ used to select schools for closure and held community meetings. Based on input from parents and the community, the Chancellor revised the list of schools to be closed. The consolidation plan was finalized in March 2008.

In the area of academic achievement, DCPS has set academic priorities for the 2007-2008 school year and is in the process of establishing longer-term priorities. The Chancellor told us that the academic priorities will build on DCPS' 2006 Master Education Plan, which established key strategies and goals to direct instruction within DCPS. The Chancellor noted, however, that the 2006 plan cited copious goals and objectives without prioritizing

²²The Chancellor's school consolidation plan was reported in the Washington Post on November 28, 2007, before the Chancellor provided the plan to the D.C. Council.

²³The primary criterion for school closings was the decline in student enrollment in schools from 2002-2006.

and establishing explicit time frames or clear strategies for how DCPS would meet the goals. In November 2007, DCPS laid out its 2007-2008 academic priorities, which included key objectives and strategies that focus on improving student achievement, school facilities, parental and community involvement, and central office operations. For example, under its objective to improve student achievement, DCPS identified, as a major initiative, efforts to recruit and hire high-quality principals for roughly one-third of its schools. According to the Chancellor, getting high-quality principals to serve as instructional leaders is a key step to improving the quality of teachers and classroom instruction. DCPS has launched a national recruitment strategy and plans to select candidates by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. The Chancellor is also focusing on longer-term priorities, such as developing a districtwide curriculum aligned to academic standards and assessments, and providing teachers with professional development on instructional strategies for the curriculum. DCPS is currently working on a five year academic plan that is to be completed by March 2008. (See table 1 for key initiative and completion dates.)

Table 1: Status of DCPS and State Superintendent Office Key Initiatives and Scheduled Completion Date or Completed Date

Office	Key initiatives	Scheduled completion Date	Completed
DCPS	• Fill teacher vacancies and deliver textbooks by opening day of 2007-08 school year	August 2007	✓
	• Set academic priorities for 2007-08 school year	November 2007	✓
	• Announce school consolidation plan	November 2007	✓
	• Implement new employee evaluation system for central office personnel	December 2007	✓
	• Launch Campaign to Recruit Candidates for Principal Positions	December 2007	✓
	• Hold community hearings on preliminary school consolidation plan	January-February 2008	✓
	• Finalize school consolidation plan	March 2008	✓
	• Establish longer term priorities for 2008-09 school year through 2011-12 school year	April 2008	
	• Select candidates for principal positions	May 2008	
	• Consolidate many of the 25 data systems	February 2009	
State Superintendents Office	• Finalize transition plan	September 2007	✓
	• Transfer most state related functions from DCPS	October 2007	✓
	• Refine unique student identification numbers	October 2007	✓
	• Implement a new employee evaluation system	January 2008	✓
	• Award contract to build the statewide longitudinal database	May 2008	
	• Complete development of statewide longitudinal data system	January 2012	

Source: GAO analysis of information provided by D.C. officials

Facilities Has Begun to Address Back Log of Work Orders and Is Developing a New Process to Respond to Needed Repairs

The facilities office has worked since the summer of 2007 to address the backlog of repairs the office inherited from DCPS. The director of the office told us that he found that school heating and plumbing systems were inoperable, roofs leaked, and floors needed replacing. In addition, he told us that many schools were in violation of District fire codes with exit doors locked from the inside for security. The director of the facilities office also told us that when his office took responsibility for school maintenance, he found thousands of work orders that had been submitted to address these building deficiencies that had not been closed. In some cases the repairs were completed but the work order was not closed; however, in many cases, the work orders were several years old and the repairs had not been completed. In addition, the facilities director found that most of the work orders did not adequately reflect the scope of the

work needed, and the cost of the repairs was underestimated. For example, he told us that a work order may request repairs related to the symptom rather than the cause of the problem, such as painting over a water stain in the ceiling rather than fixing the more expensive plumbing problem.

To address the backlog and ongoing facilities needs, the new office undertook several programs this summer and early fall. Repairs were made to over 70 schools that were not slated to undergo modernization for years. According to facilities officials, needed painting, plumbing, electrical, and other work were done at each of the schools. In addition, systems were assessed at all District schools for heat and air conditioning repairs. According to the facilities director, all schools with central air conditioning received upgrades and about 670 new air conditioning units were installed. The office found, however, that about 1,000 to 1,500 classrooms did not have air conditioning. To ensure classrooms have air conditioning by spring 2008, the facilities office is planning to upgrade electrical systems to allow installation of new cooling units. According to the director, the office has also made repairs to school heating systems and all schools had heat by October 15, 2007. He noted that many of the heating repairs could have been avoided if the heating systems had received adequate maintenance. The office found many schools where boilers installed only three to four years ago were inoperable due to poor maintenance. The office also started a “stabilization” program in the fall of 2007, to make improvements to the remaining 70 or so schools. About \$120 million is budgeted to correct possible fire code violations and make plumbing, roofing, and other repairs. According to the facilities director, the work order backlog should be largely eliminated by these maintenance and modernization efforts.

Furthermore, a facility official told us that they are prioritizing work order requests by the urgency of the request, that is, whether it is a hazard to students or a routine repair. According to this official, emergency repairs are addressed the day, or the day after, the work order is submitted. Routine repairs and maintenance, such as plumbing and painting, are addressed by the in-house trades (painters, plumbers) while more complicated repairs are addressed by contractors that have been “pre-qualified” by the facility office. Contracts for major repairs, such as replacing an entire roof, are put out for competitive bid.

Finally, District officials told us that the facilities office is in the process of revising the DCPS 2006 Master Facilities Plan, which outlined how DCPS planned to use and improve school buildings, offices and other facilities

over a 15 year period. According to District officials, the revised plan will align with the Chancellor's academic priorities and school consolidation efforts. The Master Facilities Plan was due on October 1, 2007, but the facilities director was granted an extension until May 31, 2008.

D.C. Mayor Has Begun to Develop a Framework for Accountability

The Mayor and education officials have introduced a performance-based process designed to establish accountability for their school reform efforts. This process includes weekly meetings to track progress and accomplishments across education offices and annual performance plans for these offices, including the D.C. Department of Education's plan. According to recent studies of the D.C. school system, little was done in the past to hold offices and education leaders accountable for progress.²⁴

Weekly meetings are a key component of the District's performance-based process and, according to the Deputy Mayor for Education, integral to how the Mayor and D.C. education offices monitor the progress of reform efforts. The Mayor's meetings, known as CapStat meetings,²⁵ are used to track progress and accomplishments across all D.C. government offices. Every 3 months, the City Administrator's office develops a list of topics for possible discussion at CapStat meetings based, in part, on a review of each office's performance plan. According to city officials, issues for CapStat meetings typically concern agencies having difficulty meeting their specific performance targets. These issues are given to the Mayor who then selects which ones will be discussed. The Mayor may also identify other issues that have emerged as immediate concerns, for example, those related to the safety and health of D.C. residents.²⁶

²⁴*Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*, Council of the Great City Schools, Washington, D.C. (Jan. 2004); *Fact-Base for DCPS Reform*, The Parthenon Group, Boston, London, San Francisco, (Dec. 2006).

²⁵CapStat is modeled after Baltimore's CitiStat accountability program. Baltimore uses CitiStat to develop and employ citywide strategies, measure results, and hold city managers accountable. CitiStat, which began in 2000, is similar to the New York City Police Department's CompStat crime tracking program, which debuted in 1994. While there has been some analysis on the effectiveness of CompStat and CitiStat, it is difficult to determine whether they were the cause of any improvement in government performance.

²⁶Over the past 8 months, CapStat meetings have focused on a multitude of issues, including education, economic development, public safety, health and human services, and government operations.

At the CapStat meeting, cognizant managers provide status updates using performance data. The Mayor then assigns follow-up tasks to particular managers with agreed-upon timeframes. The Mayor reviews whether follow-up tasks have been completed. This tracking provides the basis for the Mayor's office to monitor progress, and, if inadequate, determine what further action is needed. For example, during the summer of 2007, a CapStat meeting focused on school facilities. The data indicated that many of the schools' heating systems were not functioning. The Mayor's office asked the director of the facilities office to develop a plan within 2 weeks to ensure that all schools had functional heating systems by mid-October. Officials told us the Mayor's office tracked the submission of the plan and the heating system work. As previously mentioned, District officials reported that all schools had heat by October 15.

The Chancellor and the State Superintendent adopted processes similar to CapStat—SchoolStat and EdStat, respectively—to hold managers accountable for their offices' performance (see table 2 for information on the three "Stat" meetings). The Chancellor uses weekly SchoolStat meetings to discuss high-priority issues and what actions DCPS department managers need to take to improve performance. Similarly, the state superintendent's office uses weekly EdStat meetings to monitor progress in administration of federal grants and special education services. At EdStat meetings, managers analyze performance data, collaborate with program managers on remediation strategies, and monitor subsequent performance data to validate the effectiveness of actions taken. The State Superintendent plans to use EdStat meetings to monitor whether the office is meeting time frames for providing assistance to schools identified as in need of improvement under NCLBA.

Table 2: Performance-Based Education Meetings: Focus and Attendees

Meeting title (office responsible)	Meeting focus	Who attends the meetings
CapStat (Mayor's Office)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CapStat meetings may pertain to the activities of any D.C. government office CapStat meetings on education issues have included such topics as school security, facilities, special education transportation, and financial management issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> D.C. Mayor City Administrator D.C. Chief Financial Officer Head of General Counsel Other D.C. agency heads, as appropriate (e.g., Chief of Police Dept. or Director of Transportation Dept.) Deputy Mayor for Education State Superintendent DCPS Chancellor Director of facilities office CapStat director Other CapStat support staff
SchoolStat (DCPS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SchoolStat meetings focus on key outcome and input data of D.C. public schools, including truancy, school security, facility work orders, responsiveness to constituents, and procurement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DCPS Chancellor Chiefs of DCPS departments, including Schools, Teaching and Learning, and Data and Accountability SchoolStat manager
EdStat (State Superintendent's Office)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EdStat meetings are currently focused on special education and federal grants management, with a future focus on schools that are in improvement status under NCLBA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State Superintendent Deputy superintendents Chief of staff EdStat director EdStat data analyst

Source: GAO analysis of information provided by D.C. officials

In addition to weekly meetings, the Mayor's office requires education offices to develop and follow annual performance plans as another component of the accountability process. These performance plans include broad objectives, such as increasing student achievement, assessing the effectiveness of educational programs, and coordinating services with city agencies. In addition, the plans detail specific actions to achieve these objectives, and key performance indicators designed to measure progress. For example, regarding DCPS' 2007-2008 performance plan objective to increase student achievement, DCPS plans to provide training for teachers to help them make better use of student performance data. Similarly, regarding the State Superintendent's objective to provide educators with information needed to improve schools and to assess the

effectiveness of educational programs, the office plans to provide data from its longitudinal database to educators to help them determine where specialized programs are needed. The first performance plan for the facilities office is scheduled to be in place in November 2008.

The D.C. Department of Education has taken some steps to coordinate and integrate the various efforts of the District's education offices. The Deputy Mayor for Education told us that the department reviews the individual annual performance plans of education offices to ensure they are aligned and not working at cross-purposes. The department also uses CapStat meetings to monitor the progress of the education offices. In addition, according to the Deputy Mayor for Education, the department tracks the goals and activities of city youth agencies, such as the Child and Family Services Agency, to ensure they are consistent with the goals of the education offices.²⁷ D.C. Department of Education officials also told us they will take additional steps in the future. The Deputy Mayor will review each education office's long-term plan, such as the Chancellor's five year academic plan and the revised Master Facilities Plan, to ensure they are coordinated and implemented. The Deputy Mayor also told us that the department will rely on findings from annual evaluations of DCPS to assess the progress of the reform efforts.²⁸

Officials with the D.C. Department of Education told us they have not yet developed a documented districtwide education strategic plan. According to department officials, they do not intend to develop a written plan at this time, in part, because they are addressing immediate and urgent issues. They questioned the need for a written document as opposed to a formalized process that would help ensure that the individual District education offices' long-term plans are coordinated and executed.

While developing a long-term strategic plan takes time, it is useful for entities undergoing a major transformation, such as the D.C. public school system. The District has a new public school governance structure and newly created education offices. A strategic plan, and the process of developing one, helps organizations look across the goals of multiple

²⁷The Interagency Commission's goals include ensuring that children are ready for school, succeed in school, and make a successful transition into adulthood.

²⁸The Reform Act requires the Mayor to submit to the D.C. Council an annual and independent evaluation of the progress of DCPS' business practices, human resources operations, and academic plans, as well as a detailed description of student achievements.

offices and determine whether they are aligned and connected or working at cross-purposes. By articulating an overall mission or vision, a strategic plan helps organizations set priorities, implementation strategies, and timelines to measure progress of multiple offices. A long-term strategic plan is also an important communication tool, articulating a consistent set of goals and marking progress for employees and key stakeholders, from legislative bodies to community organizations.

Conclusions

The problems in the D.C. public school system are long-standing. Past efforts to reform the system and ultimately raise student achievement have been unsuccessful. The Reform Act made many changes: new divisions of responsibility, improved oversight, and greater opportunity for the Chancellor to focus on academic progress. The Mayor and his education team recognized that before they could take full advantage of these changes, they would have to revamp the school system's basic infrastructure. Their initial efforts, including those to create a highly functional central office and repair school buildings to make them safe for students, provide some of the basics for successful learning environments. However, the Mayor and his team will need to sustain the momentum created over the last 6 months and focus as quickly as possible on the challenges that lie ahead—improving the reading and math skills of students and the instructional skills of teachers.

In addition, the Mayor and his team have taken steps to hold managers and staff accountable for improving the school system, such as holding weekly performance meetings, developing annual performance plans, and coordinating education activities. These changes form the cornerstone of the Mayor's effort to transform the organizational culture of the District's public education system. However, the Mayor's team has not yet developed a long-term districtwide strategic education plan. Given the significant transformation underway, a strategic plan could provide a framework for coordinating the work of the education offices and assessing short-term and long-term progress. Without a plan that sets priorities, implementation goals, and timelines, it may be difficult to measure progress over time and determine if the District is truly achieving success. Additionally, a districtwide strategic education plan would increase the likelihood that the District's education offices work in unison toward common goals and that resources are focused on key priorities, not non-critical activities. A strategic plan could also help determine when mid-course corrections are needed. Given that leadership changes, a strategic education plan would provide a road map for future district leaders by explaining the steps taken, or not taken, and why.

Recommendation to the Mayor of the District of Columbia

To help ensure the long-term success of the District's transformation of its public school system, we recommend that the Mayor direct the D.C. Department of Education to develop a long-term districtwide education strategic plan. The strategic plan should include certain key elements including a mission or vision statement, long-term goals and priorities, and approaches and time frames for assessing progress and achieving goals. It may also include a description of the relationship between the long-term strategic and annual performance goals. In addition, the strategic plan should describe how coordination is to occur among the District's education offices.

As you know Mr. Chairman, you have requested that we conduct a second, longer-term study of changes in D.C. schools' management and operations, and results of these changes. We will begin that study this month.

Comments from the D.C. Mayor's Office and District Education Offices

We provided a draft of this report to the offices of the Mayor and District education officials for review and comment, and on March 11, 2008, officials from the Mayor's office discussed their comments with us. They told us they support the need for an overarching strategy that integrates the efforts and plans of DCPS, the state superintendent's office, and the facilities office. They said that these offices are in the process of developing long-term strategic plans to serve as the foundation for an overall education strategy, and that the Deputy Mayor for Education is committed to coordinating and sustaining these efforts. Further, they noted that a districtwide strategy can take many forms, and that the Deputy Mayor's preferred approach is to develop a formal process, rather than a written document, to ensure efforts are coordinated and executed as efficiently as possible. They noted that in the past, plans were written, "put on a shelf," and never used.

We agree that the Deputy Mayor is taking steps to coordinate the individual plans of these offices, and that the Mayor's education team recognizes the importance of taking a strategic approach to address the educational needs of District students. However, as we have said in this statement, we see value in developing a documented strategy that could help the District's education leaders coordinate their efforts and goals, and provide future leaders the benefit of understanding what worked, what didn't, and why. While past administrations may have developed strategic plans and not used them, what is unknown is whether these plans could have been of value if they had been used. The current administration's development and implementation of an articulated documented strategy could provide a foundation that would help coordinate future efforts.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

GAO Contacts

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